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ABSTRACT

Legitimation is suggested as a major function of schools in modern society and as a means of better understanding of the role that schooling plays in the development of society. The concept of "legitimation," as formulated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman is applied to analyze several historical and contemporary educational ideas which are utilized as legitimations of social conditions. Discussion is presented on the different levels of pre-theoretical and theoretical propositions. Two considerations are 1) that ideas about schools and schooling legitimate some aspects of the institutional order, and 2) that the institutionalization of education as schools and school systems legitimates from the point of view of the general public. For both the focus must ultimately be on ideas at the level of everyday or common sense knowledge because it is the general public for whom institutional arrangements and practices must be legitimated. Two supporting examples illustrate a) the role of educational ideas in legitimating gradations in status and income as an aspect of social order, and b) a way in which schools are legitimated in the eyes of the general public. A need for more extensive inquiry into legitimation is suggested. (Author/ND)

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THE LEGITIMATION FUNCTION OF EDUCATIONAL IDEAS

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THE LEGITIMATION FUNCTION OF EDUCATION IDEAS

It is a matter of general consensus among educational sociologists that the school in modern society serves three major functions, the distribution of knowledge, secondary socialization, and selection-allocation for occupational roles.[1] It is the purpose of this paper to suggest that a fourth function ought to be considered as major, and that is the function of legitimation. In recent years, as many of our basic assumptions about schools and schooling have been challenged, as the "myths" of earlier educational historians have been exposed, the legitimation function emerges more and more clearly as a basic component of the total role schools have played in our national history. In this brief treatment of the subject, I will do no more than present a few illustrations of the legitimation function which I hope will suggest some possibilities for more extensive inquiry.

It is Max Weber who first suggests that legitimation be considered a function of schooling in industrial society. While Durkheim, in his preoccupation with the social and moral consequences of a vastly extended division of labo , can be credited with calling attention to the first two functions mentioned above, it is Weber's interest in the nature of authority and its legitimation that provides the initial insight for a recognition of the selection-allocation function, and more subtly, the legitimation function. Weber's typology of social orders is derived from three types of authority systems, charismatic, traditional and legal. While charismatic authority resides in the heroic or magical gifts of individuals and traditional authority rests with the inherited status of elite groups, none of which qualities are affected very much by education, legal authority is based on functional competence and adherence to rationally created rules, qualities which are increasingly determined by formal

education. Further, in his discussion of the growth of examination systems, Weber, with a single stroke, brings the selection-allocation function to the fore and anticipates our contemporary preoccupation with equality of educational opportunity.

> Special examinations, on the one hand, mean or appear to mean a "selection" of those who qualify from all social strata rather than a rule by notables. On the other hand, democracy fears that a merit system and educational certificates will result in a privileged "caste." Hence, democracy fights against the special-examination system.[2]

For Weber, wherever bureaucratic and legal authority triumph, it is formal educational attainments and/or success on formal examination which legitimate this authority, that is, make it appear reasonable and just from the point of view of the larger society. This, however, is a very restricted use of the concept of legitimation, though one which was current in the social sciences until recently. As bureaucracy has expanded to include an ever larger share of our public lives and as education has become schooling and schooling has become free, universal, and compulsory the question of legitimacy becomes more diffuse. It then becomes necessary to look for many other ways in which education, and our ideas about education, legitimate aspects of our social life. To facilitate this, let us turn to a much more recent and more elaborate discussion of the concept of legitimation than Weber's.

In their book, The Social Construction of Reality, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman offer a paradigmatic description of the process of institutionalization.[3] Institutions are seen to arise first out of Man's need to construct a social-cultural environment which will pattern and direct his energies in lieu of the biologically determined drives and instincts which pattern the behavior of other mammals, and

second, out of Man's capacity to habitualize aspects of his behavior and to typify these as habitual. Incipient institutionalization occurs whenever two or more individuals reciprocally typify the actions of each other as habitual and modify their own behavior as a consequent. As these reciprocal typifications continue through time they acquire a shared history and become firmer in their ability to channel and control human conduct. Full institutionalization is reached when a second generation enters the scene and is introduced to these nascent institutions. They then lose their ad hoc quality and become objectified, that is, they become a social world "confronting the individual in a manner analogous to the reality of the natural world."[4]

It is also at this precise point that the need for legitimation arises. As Berger and Luckman put it, "only with the transmission of the social world to a new generation does the fundamental social dialectic appear in its totality . . . At the same point, the institutional world requires legitimation, that is, ways by which it can be 'explained' and justified."[5] There are two points here of importance. First, it is clear that all social institutions, not just forms of authority as suggested by Weber, require legitimation. Second, the need for legitimation arises when one generation passes on the institutional world to the next; thus it is at the heart of the educational process, broadly conceived.

It can now be pointed out that there is a fundamental ambiguity in the notion of the legitimation function of educational ideas. This might refer to the ways in which ideas about education serve to legitimate institutions in the larger society, or it could refer to those ideas which serve to legitimate educational institutions per se. Both of these senses are included for discussion in this paper, because both are important in understanding the full role of schools in society. But is it only at the level of ideas that institutions are legitimated?

Berger and Luckman call attention to four analytically distinct levels of legitimation. First, "incipient legitimation is present as soon as a system of linguistic objectifications of human experience is transmitted."[6] Here, legitimations are "built into" vocabulary as when the very name of a relationship carries with it obligatory conduct. An example in our culture might be the term "teacher" which a child learns as simultaneously designating a category of significant others and as legitimating a pattern of conduct with regard to those others. The same could perhaps be said of the term, "school."

"The second level of legitimation contains theoretical propositions in a rudimentary form."[7] These are explanatory schemes relating sets of objective meanings, such as proverbs, moral maxims, and tales. As an example, consider the tale of Pinnochio. Adults remember him only as a puppet whose nose grew to enormous lengths whenever he told a lie. Children, however, will tell you that Pinnochio set off to school in order to become a real boy, and that everytime he failed to arrive at school at the appointed time, he fell into a terrible misadventure. Even when he did make it to school, he took up with ne'er-do wells and underachievers, ran off to a land where children play instead of study, and turned into a donkey. In the mind of a five-year old, this could be a powerful legitimator.

"The third level of legitimation contains explicit theories by which an institutional sector is legitimated in terms of a differentiated body of knowledge."[8] Here we enter the wonderful world of the schools and colleges of education. We find theories of curriculum, theories of learning, theories of administration, theories of value, theories of counseling, and on and on. The bulk of this, though by no means all, serves to legitimate one or another aspect of an institutional arrangement in the schools. Moreover, this is inherently the case. Though some of these theories may be critical (or delegitimating), most must legitimate institutional practices

which approximate those actually being carried out in the society. This is true because of the fact that schools of education only exist as institutional extensions of public schools, i.e. as extensions of a particular institutionalization of education.

To make this more clear, consider what would happen if the maxim "good teachers are born, not made" were to be taken seriously in the larger society. First, our elaborate mechanisms for teacher training and certification would cease to exist. Second, the supply-demand position of teachers would be vastly altered. Third, some new basis for calculating the pay scales of teachers would have to be found, etc. Here, then, is a legitimating formula which must be strictly combatted by the coteries of experts who train our teachers and develop theories to legitimate the educational order. Once this has been done successfully, however, as it clearly has been done, there is wide latitude for conflicting theories as to how good teachers are made. The distribution of knowledge and socialization functions of schools of education are legitimated as an aspect of the exercise of their function as professional legitimators of the other schooling institutions.

Berger and Luckman's fourth level is that of "symbolic universes," bodies of theoretical tradition that integrate provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality."[9] At this level of legitimation, "all the sectors of the institutional order are integrated in an all-embracing frame of reference, which now constitutes a universe in the literal sense of the word, because all human experience can now be conceived as taking place within it."[10]

To discuss the legitimation function of educational ideas at this most encompassing level is highly problematic. In the first place, there is considerable doubt that the institutional order of modern society is integrated in an all-embracing frame of reference. Presumably, this would have to be something

like "technical rationality" or "scientific technology," and if we were to accept that this mode of thought integrates, and thus legitimates, the whole, we could then delineate the fairly powerful role that educational ideas play in this system. Weber's notion of the legitimation of legal and bureaucratic authority would re-enter the discussion at this level, with some necessary modifications. However, the moment we turn from the question of the integration of the institutional order to the question of the integration of individual subjective identities into this order we realize just how questionable it is to speak of the symbolic universe of modern society. At the level of individuals, it is clear that a serious problem of overarching meaning exists, and that it is increasingly difficult for people to find themselves reflected in the institutional order.

It should be noted that, of all contemporary writers on education, only Ivan Illich appears to argue that schooling legitimates the institutional order as a symbolic totality. His use of such phrases as "the age of schooling" and "deschooling the culture" serves to elevate the importance of educational ideas and to make schools the pivotal institution in post-industrial society."[11]

In the remainder of this paper I wish to back away from this highest and most global level of legitimation. I am most concerned with the levels of pre-theoretical and theoretical propositions and the somewhat grey area between. The legitimation function of educational ideas runs in two directions: ideas about schools and schooling legitimate aspects of the institutional order and the institutionalization of education as schools and school systems must be legitimated from the point of view of the general public. In both these directions, however, we must focus ultimately on ideas at the level of everyday or common sense knowledge, for while a great deal of professional legitimation is developed for the benefit of other

professionals, it is ultimately the general public for whom institutional arrangements and practices must be legitimated.

This is a fundamental weakness in David Swift's work, Ideology and Change in the Public Schools.[12] Swift's thesis is the demographic and social pressures on the schools in the early part of this century forced educators to make changes in disciplinary procedures, curriculum, administration, etc. which were then, in turn, rationalized in terms of progressivist philosophy of education. What he does not show is how, or even whether, this progressive philosophy was translated into terms which made these changes palatable to (i.e., legitimate in the eyes of) the general public.

Let me present just two examples of the legitimation function of educational ideas in the terms which I believe to be most significant and useful. The first example illustrates the role of educational ideas in legitimating an aspect of the social order, namely differentiation of status and income, the second suggests a way in which schools are legitimated in the eyes of the general public.

The past fifteen years have witnessed an almost monumental research effort devoted to the study of the interrelationships between social origins, school performances, and adult status and economic achievement. This is only partly explained by reference to our rational priorities during this period. It is also due to the fact that certain cherished axioms of American liberalism began to be challenged by the liberal social scientists' own research findings. James S. Coleman's discovery in 1966 that "schools make no difference, families make the difference,"[13] triggered an explosion of interest among sociologists, economists, and other social scientists, most of whom had considered these issues "closed." The result has been a statistician's orgy, with researchers reanalysing each other's data until the holes in the cards wear out.

Yet, as Robert M. Hauser remarks, "In spite of this large volume of effort, it is doubtful there has been much

movement toward consensus or consolidation with regard to choice of concepts or orientations toward data, let alone powerful explanatory schemes or detailed empirical findings."[14] The range of views is wide indeed. The Coleman study[15] found that differences in school quality factors explain very little of the variance in individual school achievement and this view was sustained by the Harvard seminar.[16] Bowles and Levin,[17] however, have attacked it and continue to see inequality in school input factors as a significant determinant of school success. Jencks[18] has challenged the view that school achievement or cognitive development has much to do with adult status and income, as well as the notion that these latter are closely related to family background, emphasizing instead the great amount of variance unaccounted for by any of these systemic determinants. He suggests that luck and chance play a very large role. Jencks' book was attacked on all sides, but more on ideological than methodological grounds.

A highly tentative way to summarize the current research position on the linkages between social origins, school achievement and attainment, and adult status and income would be as follows. Social origin factors (except possibly race) have little effect on adult status and income, except as mediated through school attainment. Their effects on school attainment are moderately large, and in turn the effect of school attainment on status and income is quite significant, though school achievement is not. However, school input factors (quality or equality of education) has little to do with either school attainment or achievement. Policy controversy centers on (1) whether or not it is worth the effort to pursue equality of school inputs, (2) whether the proper focus of this research should be on the analysis of individual or group variance, and (3) whether or not the unexplained variance in all these linkages is sufficient to challenge the very idea of systemic relationships in social stratification.

Now two points must be made about this research if we are to begin to clarify the legitimation function of educational ideas. First, this research concerns itself directly with the selection-allocation function of schooling, and, to a lesser extent, the socialization and training functions. It is an attempt to discover how the schools actually work in determining social roles. Secondly, knowledge of this research is limited to a relatively small coterie of experts and to a "relevant public" of policy makers in state and federal educational agencies. Even among faculty in schools and colleges of education knowledge of this research seems to be minimal, except among people directly involved in closely related fields. It is thus quite reasonable to distinguish between a "social scientific" view of the relations between schooling and the stratification system and another, much more widely diffused pre-theoretical view which can be called the "conventional wisdom."

I would like to suggest that this conventional wisdom about the connections between schooling and life careers serves to legitimate the American social order. Of course, it would be difficult to "prove" that this is the case, in part because of my earlier contention that the legitimation function of education has been a neglected subject of inquiry, but it is possible to point to some "clues" that tend to support this view.

First, consider the 1973 Gallup Poll of Attitudes Toward Education.[19] One item concerned the relation of schooling and success. Responses were stratified according to race, sex, age, religion, region, community size, level of education, occupation, and income. In the overwhelming majority of subcategories, more than three-fourths of the respondents indicated that schooling was "extremely important." In no category did this response dip below 60%, and among non-white respondents it reached 84%, the highest for any group. Clearly, the overwhelming majority of Americans do not accept the views of

some experts that school attainment has little to do with adult success.

The question, "Are differences in income and status between individuals in our society justified?" is very seldom put to the average American. Yet, I have put this question to a group of twenty to twenty-five blue collar workers each year for the past six years in a course which I teach in our Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations called American Society Today. In six years, no one has argued that differences are not justified, and with further questioning it becomes clear that it is essentially school performance which justifies these differences. Furthermore, much to my dismay as an educational sociologist, these workers feel that they were treated fairly by the schools, that the schools' ultimate assessment of their abilities was essentially correct, and that they hold the occupations they hold because of these school-assessed differences in ability. I have to work very hard to get them to consider that schooling might be highly class-biased.

As impressionistic as they are, these findings are supported by Robert Lane's much more systematic analysis of working class ideology. He says,

> The concept of "education" is the key to much of the thinking on social class and personal status. In a sense, it is a "natural" because it fits so neatly into the American myth of opportunity and equality, and provides a rationale for success and failure that does minimum damage to the souls of those who do not go to college.[20]

In a later discussion, Lane suggests that education justifies differences in income on four grounds: increased skills, the time spent in educational preparation, the increased responsibility that goes with education, and the pain and hard work associated with going to school.

More recently, Sennett and Cobb's interviews with working class ethnics in Boston reveal this same theme.[21] Education was frequently cited to account for the vagaries of life careers. Here however, the authors found strong support for the notion that what education provides is the opportunity to become a "more complete person," more of an individual. It is this, in turn, which justifies not only differential reward but also differential authority.

Let me stress again that what I am suggesting here is that schooling, and more particularly the conventional wisdom about schooling, serves to legitimate the gradations of status and income found in our highly stratified society. This legitimation function is, for the time being, completely independent of whatever knowledge experts have of the actual functioning of schools in the area of selection-allocation, and it deserves separate study. The claim by the revisionist historians that social mobility in the United States has been "strictly regulated" by the schools deserves the attention it has been getting but this should not be allowed to obscure that fact that while this "regulatory" function remains problematic, the function of the schools in legitimating stratification is more clear and probably more powerful.

The foregoing discussion was intended to illustrate a way in which educational ideas, in this case commonly held ideas about schools, serve to legitimate an institutional feature of the larger society. Let us now consider an example of how an idea may be used to legitimate some feature of the schools, themselves. There has been a great deal of rhetoric of late to the effect that public schools are or ought to be likened to business enterprises. Those familiar with educational history will recognize this "business analogy" as an old and persistent theme in American education. One might ask, what is the function of this rhetoric? In attempting to map out an historical inquiry into this question, my

students and I have discovered that the use of this analogy is not as persistent as it might appear, but is rather periodic, i.e. it is heavily utilized at some times and seldom found at others. For example, it can readily be found in the early 1880's, the 1910 to 1930 period discussed by Callahan,[22] and again in the 1970's. It is rare to find its use in the 1890's or the 1930's. Tentatively, two hypotheses have been put forth: the business analogy will be found whenever the public schools are under extraordinarily severe criticism and/or it will be found whenever the prestige of the business community is high and absent whenever it is low.

For the purposes of this paper, if either of these hypotheses are born out it will lend some support to the view that the function of this analogy is legitimation. This is not to suggest that those who invoke the business analogy are not in some sense "critics" of educational practice. However, both Frank Spaulding's cries for greater school efficiency in the 'teens[23] and Leon Lessinger's call for educational engineering and accountability in the 'seventies[24] respresent the kind of criticism which shores up and maintains the basic structure of an institution in the face of much more fundamental assault. The concept of accountability, for example, while it questions whether or not schools have been as effective as they should be in developing children's basic skills, strongly reaffirms the view that learning is the outcome of teaching and thus further legitimates the school as the basic institution of education.

I realize that these two examples which I have provided are not sufficient to demonstrate that the legitimation function of educational ideas is a major one, nor <u>should</u> it be sufficient. I would merely hope to stimulate greater attention to this function as we strive to understand the roles schooling plays and has played in the development of our society. It

should be of great interest to those committed to reforming our educational institutions to know just how much and in what ways traditional school practices are legitimated in the very vocabularies we use to discuss them. It is also important to understand the consequences of changing educational ideas as these bear on other aspects of the institutional order. A functional analysis of education which overlooks the legitimation function will never fully grasp the role that schooling plays in the lives of people long after they've ceased to be direct participants in a school.

NOTES

1. See for example Sam D. Sieber and David E. Wilder, The School in Society: Studies in the Sociology of Education (New York: The Free Press, 1973) pp. 1-6. In their overview of the field the authors combine the first two functions as socialization-training and introduce a "fourth," organization maintainence, which has some commonality with the concept of legitimation discussed in this paper.

2. Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, edited and translated by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Oxford University Press, 1946) p. 240.

3. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, The Social Construction of Reality (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1967) 219 pp.

4. Ibid., p. 59.

5. Ibid., p. 61.

6. Ibid., p. 94.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., p. 95.

10. Ibid., p. 96.

11. See Ivan Illich, "Commencement at the University of Puerto Richo," The New York Review of Books, Vol. XIII, No. 6 (October 9, 1969) and "The Alternative to Schooling," Saturday Review, June 19, 1971.

12. David Swift, Ideology and Change in the Public Schools: The Latent Functions of Progressive Education (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1971) 214 pp.

13. See Godfrey Hodgson, "Do Schools Make A Difference?" The Atlantic Monthly, March 1973, pp. 35-46.

14. Robert M. Hauser, "Educational Stratification in the United States," Social Stratification: Research and Theory, Laumann, ed. (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1970) p. 103.

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15. James Coleman, et. al., Equality of Educational Opportunity (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 1966).

16. Frederick Mosteller and Daniel P. Moynihan, eds., On Equality of Educational Opportunity (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

17. Samuel S. Bowles and Henry M. Levin, "Equality of Educational Opportunity: More on Multicolinearity and the Effectiveness of Schools," The Journal of Human Resources (Summer, 1968) and "The Determinants of Scholastic Achievement - An Appraisal of Some Recent Evidence," The Journal of Human Resources 3 (Winter, 1968), pp. 3-24. See also James S. Coleman, "Equality of Educational Opportunity: Reply to Bowles and Levin," The Journal of Human Resources 3 (Spring), pp. 237-246.

18. Christopher Jencks, et. al., Equality: A Re-Assessment of the Effects of Family and Schooling in America (New York: Basic Books, 1972). Also Mary Jo Bane and Christopher Jencks, "The Schools and Equal Opportunity," Saturday Review of Education (September 16, 1972), pp. 37-42.

19. Stanley Elam, ed., The Gallup Polls of Attitudes Toward Education, 1969-1973 (Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa, 1973), pp. 178-179.

20. Robert E. Lane, Political Ideology: Why the American Common Man Believes What He Does (New York: The Free Press, 1962). p. 68.

21. Richard Sennett, and Jonathan Cobb, The Hidden Injuries of Class (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 53-119.

22. Raymond E. Callahan, Education and the Cult of Efficiency (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962).

23. Ibid., pp. 67-78.

24. Leon Lessinger, Every Kid a Winner: Accountability in Education (Palo Alto, Calif: Science Research Associates, Inc., 1970).